DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 955 PS 025 924

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TITLE How Will Implementing Authentic Assessment Procedures during Choice Time Affect Teacher/Parent Communication?
PUB DATE 1997-05-00
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Observation Techniques; *Emotional Development; Evaluation Methods; *Informal Assessment; *Kindergarten Children; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; Primary Education; Report Cards; Social Development; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Authentic Assessment

ABSTRACT

A kindergarten teacher used authentic assessment--assessments carried out during creative learning activities that document growth and support further learning--to evaluate the social and emotional growth of students. Prior to the implementation of authentic assessment, the teacher had not used any form of systematic observation, recording, or analysis of student behavior or skills in the area of social and emotional growth. Consequently, the teacher had to rely on generalized memories when completing each student's quarterly checklist and narrative report. Through the implementation of systematic observation and notetaking during the daily "choice time" in the kindergarten classroom, followed by analysis, the quarterly report card and other types of teacher-parent communication became not only more detailed and verifiable, but also more useful for the support and extension of each individual student's learning. The case of one student with social and emotional difficulties illustrates the effectiveness of the new assessment system. (Contains 29 references.) (MDM)

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How will implementing authentic assessment procedures during choice time affect teacher/parent communication?

Jean Hannon

May, 1997

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Abstract

The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District's Kindergarten Developmental Checklist lists eight areas as evidence of social/emotional growth for the teacher to grade on behalf of the student. These listings may most effectively be assessed through observation of the student's participation during classroom activities, concomitant with documentation and analysis. Prior to the anticipation of this research, I had not implemented any form of systematic observation, recording, or analysis of student behavior or skills in the area of social/emotional growth. Consequently, I had had to rely on generalized memories when completing each student's "checklist" and narrative report; I was lacking accountability. My informal written and verbal comments to parents were also most often nonspecific, and, because of this, did little to extend the development of each student either within or outside the classroom. Through the implementation of systematic observation and notetaking during our daily choice time, followed by analysis, the quarterly report card and other manners of teacher/parent communication have become not only more detailed and verifiable, but also more useful for the support and extension of each individual student's learning.

What: Authentic Assessment By Any Other Name

Assessments embedded in the daily life of the classroom have been labeled by a variety of terms: active, alternative, authentic, classroom, dynamic, naturalistic, new, performance-based, and situated, among others (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994; Fields & Spangler, 1995; Hein, 1994; Johnson, 1993; McAfee & Long, 1994).

As in most issues semantic, the nomenclature is not as important as the goals (Gullo, 1994; Valencia, Hiebert & Afflerbach, 1994). For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term "authentic assessment" to mean assessments, carried out during creative learning activities, which document growth and support further learning (Brown, 1995; Falk, 1993; Vukelich, 1997).

Authentic assessments do not measure disconnected skills performed and viewed in isolation, but higher level thinking and a holistic grasp of concepts; the ability to use knowledge (Lee, 1992). Authentic assessment celebrates what a child knows and can do and what that child is ready to learn (Johnson, 1993; Jones, 1992). Authentic assessment emphasizes the truism that growth and development occur over time and are best evaluated under real conditions (Falk, 1993). Data is gathered and analyzed throughout the year (Popp, 1992).

Authentic assessments are not used for comparisons among children (Gullo, 1994); they offer revelations and surprises about what each child is capable of (Valencia, Hiebert & Afflerbach, 1994). "Authentic assessment always expands, rather than limits, children's options." (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993, p. 292). It acknowledges achievements, thereby boosting the child's confidence (Martin, 1996).

Authentic assessment allows us to use all our senses to develop a deeper understanding of each child (Hein, 1994). Through the process of authentic assessment, the teacher is able to make informed interventions that support continued growth. The analysis of data gathered during authentic assessment guides the teacher's teaching. Preconceived checklists and norm-referenced standardized tests serve little purpose for teaching or learning in a developmental classroom; they may

communicate misleading messages. Authentic assessment informs all the players in the learning process: child, teacher, and parent (Johnson, 1993). Linked between the learner and the curriculum, it promotes evaluation and individualization of the curriculum (Gullo, 1994; Martin, 1996). It is child centered and multidimensional (McAfee & Long, 1994). Authentic assessment allows us to focus on both the learner and our goals for that learner (Johnson, 1993).

How: Procedures

Authentic assessment may be accomplished through a variety of techniques, activities, or processes; to be considered, the procedures used must serve the goals of authentic assessment (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Valencia, et. al., 1994).

Teachers observe their students on a daily basis; developing a system for and use of these observations is a viable form of authentic assessment. Systematic, continuous observation is not a casual approach to assessment (Martin, 1996). As teachers regularly observe children engaged in a wide array of activities and systematically record what they observe, they are building the evidence base from which to make inferences, extend students' learning strategies, and communicate students' development to parents (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Falk, 1994). Day-to-day careful recording and analysis of observations can clarify understandings about individual children and thus make teaching a responsive and reflective partnership (Falk, 1994). Observations are neither conclusions (Stephens, 1997) nor judgments (Falk, 1994). Observational assessment requires a thorough knowledge of child development, the ability and willingness to attempt the objective identification and recording of information, and the ability to analyze the data and make significant inferences that will lead to further growth for the child (Martin, 1996). Systematic, ongoing observations are more representational of each child than standardized tests (Jones, 1992). Through careful watching and listening, the observer comes to understand the process of a child's learning (Spodek and Saracho, 1994).

Methods for recording observations include narratives, time sampling, event sampling, rating scales, semantic differentials, and checklists, among others (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Spodek & Saracho, 1994). Time sampling and event sampling, while providing valuable information, are both more closed and less flexible than narratives (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

Narratives may take a variety of forms; diary descriptions and anecdotal records record behavior after the fact and can be excellent information resources for planning and communication. An anecdotal record is made as soon as possible following the direct observation of a single event. All relevant information from that event is included in the record (Gullo, 1994). Used to record spontaneous events, anecdotal records allow insights into a child's progress when reviewed in sequence (Grace, 1992). A running record details a series of events. Running records and specimen descriptions are all recorded continuously over a specified period of time (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Gullo, 1994). An observational note is concise (although it may include supporting details), written during a single event, and without interpretation (Gullo, 1994; Hein, 1994). It is used to aid in the description of an individual child's development; inferences are drawn at a later time (Gullo, 1994). Observational notes garner richer details than checklists or rating scales, and their narrative style more clearly segments identifying behaviors from analysis of those behaviors (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Martin, 1996).

Which: Social and Emotional Development

After a particularly misanthropic day in the classroom, our kindergarten students were dictating a new list of rules; this list strongly resembled a series of statements of what children should not be doing to each other. "I think," said five-year-old Victoria (proving that wisdom has little to do with age), "that we should all just take care of each other." Victoria was saying that children can do better than not harm each other; they can grow and develop to the point where they are actively choosing to consider each other's needs and feelings.

Humans generally do not flourish in a situation where they lack competency. To do school, children must interact with classmates; peers and adults. To love school, children need to feel that they are welcomed by others; that their inclusion is not merely mandatory. In school and "real life" it is difficult to function optimally without some form of community support built through positive interactions. It is not unusual for children to enter into classroom situations that involve peer relationship problems; teachers can help children develop conflict solving strategies through modeling and teaching social skills (Jones, 1992). Early childhood is a time of enormous potential for growth in social and emotional areas (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). The ability or inability to cooperate and work with others has implications outside the classroom and beyond early childhood (Bredekamp, 1987; Hein, 1994; Pellegrini & Glickman, 1990). The measurement of a child's ability to cooperate with peers, to take another's perspective, to solve problems collectively through compromise and negotiation, is important for providing individual guidance and support in building interpersonal relationships (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

Observation, along with recording and analysis of children's interactions with peers, is an appropriate means for assessing children's social competence (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Gullo, 1994; Pellegrini & Glickman, 1990). Teachers may record observed behaviors whose importance have been predetermined for the description, review, interpretation, and support of individual progress (Gullo, 1994). This is not an area of early childhood development typically or reliably assessed by standardized tests (Healey, 1994). Parents may more easily be convinced of an authentic assessment procedure for social skills since ranking is not particularly relevant.

Free play or choice time offers a unique opportunity to focus on how each child joins and participates in a group and solves interpersonal problems (Pellegrini & Glickman, 1990). Choice time (play time, work time, open learning, or project time; again a matter of semantics) offers a view of the child's sense of community. Choice time provides time for students to interact with small groups of peers while committing to child-directed tasks (Bredekamp, 1987). The teacher is permitted to pay attention to and reflect on the unique qualities of each child (Jones, 1992) as well as the diversity of talents within the classroom. Observations during this time allow the teacher to

deliberately watch the child in the school context chosen by the child, cause a minimum of interference, and focus on what the child can do (Martin, 1996).

Observations during choice time can help the teacher gain a better understanding of a child's prior knowledge and personal experiences, uses of language, and strategies for working in a variety of social situations. During choice time, children enter diverse situations where they reveal their thought processes as they actively construct their knowledge about how to work and play with other people. Through this access, a teacher can better understand the child and support the child's continued learning (Stephens, 1997).

Why: Parent Communication

Teaching and assessing are concomitant teacher responsibilities (Jones, 1992). One of the purposes of assessment in early childhood programs is to aid in the discussion of a student's growth and development with parents (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Jones, 1992; NAEYC, 1990). Two-way communication between teacher and parent is vital for effective assessment and evaluation (Martin, 1996). Parents know their children best and can be viewed as partners in the education of their children (Johnson, 1993; Jones, 1991). Communication between teachers and parents contributes to the child's development of positive peer relationships in the classroom (Bredekamp, 1987).

Teachers communicate with parents both formally and informally. Parents tend to affix great importance to whatever information a teacher may offer about their child (McAfee & Long, 1994). Without authentic assessment procedures, these communications may be less than informed on the part of the teacher. Because of the intensity of the parent/child relationship, parents are most interested in and gain the most from specific information about their child (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). It is important that the information obtained from observation and documentation "is shared with parents in language they can understand" (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1994, p. 17).

Data gathered during authentic assessment may speak volumes to parents in their child's own voice (McAfee & Long, 1994). Work samples, sketchings, and photographs, along with excerpts from observational notes and anecdotal records, provide a meaningful and multifaceted portrait of each young learner. Each child's support-system grows as parents increase their understanding of classroom activities and their own child's participation in and social and emotional development through those activities. Through reciprocal communication, education and assessment become collaborative processes with shared responsibilities (Popp, 1992).

Teacher/Parent Communication: Before

Although officially referred to as a "developmental checklist", many parents treat our school district's kindergarten quarterly written record with the same serious anticipation and trepidation as they would the report cards of older students.

The first area delineated on the checklist is *Social/Emotional Growth.* The headings under this are: *Works and plays cooperatively; Gets ready for activity change promptly; Participates in classroom activities; Respects rights of others; Displays self control; Shows self confidence; Shows problem solving ability; Stays on task.*

The checklist's marking system includes the following demarcations:
S; Satisfactory, N; Needs Practice, I; Improvement Shown, W; Working on Skills.
This marking system belies the title, "Developmental Checklist", and possibly promotes unrealistic or inappropriate expectations for our young learners.

Prior to the anticipation of this research, I had not implemented any form of systematic observation, recording, or analysis of student behavior or skills in the area of social/emotional growth. Consequently, I had had to rely on generalized memories when completing each student's "checklist" and narrative report. My informal written and verbal comments to parents were also most often nonspecific.

The entire summer before his entrance there, I dreaded Matthew's arrival into our kindergarten classroom. Matthew had been retained from another classroom the year before because his parents thought that Matthew's social skills would be augmented by another year of kindergarten experiences. The main contact I had had with Matthew had been during outdoor recess the previous year. Our relationship precluded mutual trust and respect.

Early in the school year, one thing became apparent; Matthew's parents are committed to Matthew's social and emotional growth and development. They regularly question me about Matthew's day at the 1:30 P.M. kindergarten pick-up time. Matthew's father also calls on a weekly basis to check on Matthew's social progress. (Academic development is not an overriding concern in Matthew's case.)
As the year continued, I realized that my comments to Matthew's parents were not particularly descriptive or constructive; I was labeling behavior, and I was labeling Matthew. My written reports on the narrative section of Matthew's kindergarten progress report were generic at best; some of the phrases were actually from books and pamphlets that offer advice to teachers on properly wording report cards and parent messages. I did not have the data to give testimony to the very real progress I knew Matthew was making with interpersonal relationships within the classroom.

The Process

I determined that I specifically wanted to observe Matthew (as well as our other kindergartners) engaged in peer interactions during choice time in order to better communicate social and emotional growth and development with parents. Having determined what was "worth assessing" (Moses, 1992), I turned my attention to four other components of assessment: collecting, recording, organizing and analyzing data (Fields & Spangler, 1995).

I had previously used observation, recording, and analysis while working at a residential care facility for adjudicated youth. At the end of each work day, staff would note details of each resident's day in an attempt to document and better understand each individual and the motives behind his or her actions. Those reports were generally (except in extreme cases) one paragraph long, written prior to leaving an eight hour shift. Individual progress could be assessed and inferences about further care within the program could be made through analysis of those anecdotal records. Reference to an individual's log was also made when considering a resident's exit from the program.

Although I understood the power of narrative reports and found anecdotal records to be "manageable tools" (Johnson, 1993, p. 5), I had practiced little notetaking during my three years of teaching kindergarten. It was time to begin deliberate and purposeful watching, listening, and recording. I chose to begin observations during choice time because of the prevalence of peer interaction and child-directed learning during that daily allotted segment of time.

I began writing my observational notes on sticky pads, moved-on to self-stick computer labels, and now use unlined, three-hole punched paper. Because this is the same paper students use for their journal writing, there are stacks of it strategically placed throughout the classroom, along with cans of sharpened pencils. I keep these pages in a three-ring binder tabbed for each individual. The binder is generally within easy reach. (See samples of observational notes in Appendix A.) I sit close enough to the subject of my attention for accurate viewing and listening without being intrusive or obtrusive. Observation should not interfere with or inhibit the child's learning (Gullo, 1994).

When students ask what I am doing when they notice me writing observational notes, I reply, "Thinking about my writing.", or "Writing about what I see." Since many kindergartners also regularly write during choice time, the students accept these explanations of my activities; some may be influenced to do more writing and drawing themselves (Jones, 1992). Many students appear relieved that I have at long last found a creative activity to commit myself to during choice time.

As I began to observe Matthew, document, and review my observations, his particular strengths and skills became more obvious to me. Focusing my attention on one child at a time (within the limits of my responsibilities as classroom teacher) has allowed me to consider Matthew's accomplishments in both social and academic areas. Because I am actually *there*, I have been able to collect work samples, sketches or photographs of Matthew's creations during choice time. As with the other children, Matthew has his own section in the observation binder as well as his own dialogue journal with dated entries. Matthew's dated and captioned work samples, self-portraits, sketches, and photographs are organized sequentially in his personal file folder. (See work samples in Appendix B.)

Analysis of the data collected during choice time follows my time spent with the children. Review of observational notes and work samples shows that Matthew often has big ideas, and, in his desire to carry them out with all possible expediency, he sometimes stomps on other students' feelings and bodies. As I puzzle over records of Matthew's "in-your-face" episodes, I add this piece: Matthew's mother is severely hearing-impaired. Analysis helps me view more clearly and utilize the picture of Matthew that began with observation and documentation.

Analysis continues to be rewarding. I have stopped thinking of Matthew as "the spoiler" and begun to better understand the motives for his actions during interactions with his classmates. Review of notes written during or following interactive conversations and one-on-one conferences has also become a means for understanding why Matthew does what he does and has come to know what he knows. Our relationship now includes mutual respect.

Results

When Matthew's parents ask me about Matthew's day, I now generally confer with Matthew; we discuss the elements of his day and his adjustments and reactions to them. In Matthew's absence or for formal and informal written reports, I check my notes. Analysis of my notes and the contents of Matthew's file folder reveal a child whose agenda is not always the same as those around him. Excerpts from interviews with Matthew speak of rationale for his actions that hint at an inquisitive and imaginative nature rather than a malicious one. Reading the notes sequentially, I have detected patterns that may aid Matthew's parents in setting sleep and meal-time parameters.

Matthew's parents now anticipate our conversations with sometimes proud and often constructive observations of their own. They are more eager to share their own specific knowledge about their child, and I have a fuller understanding of their relationship with Matthew as well as their expectations, values, and beliefs.

I understand now that it is not my job to "fix" Matthew, but to understand him (Stephens, 1997). Through observation, recording, and analysis I have developed a richer understanding of who Matthew is. Because I understand Matthew better, I like him more (Jones, 1992). Because I like him, I am better suited to be his teacher (Rabiroff & Prescott, 1973).

Conclusion

Assessment has traditionally been a highly emotional area precisely because of the implication that what is being measured is not only how well the student has learned but how well the teacher has taught (Fields & Spangler, 1995; Hein, 1994). If this is true of defined and isolated academic skills, the measurement of social competence and emotional development is an area even more inherently sensitive and complicated.

Not only do we need to question who shares in the responsibility for modeling and fostering social and emotional growth, but we need to question whether or not the parameters for and means of evaluating that growth and well-being are so heavily reliant on the setting where the assessment is carried out and the cultural framework of the assessor that our measurements are either vacuous or deleterious; sweeping moral judgments and value generalizations can too easily be made.

The use of authentic assessment techniques does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of cultural bias and preconceived notions with adverse connotations for the student (Gullo, 1994). "Without acknowledgement of the child's context, behavior cannot be understood." (Martin, 1996, p. 3). This research has led me to question whether it is advisable or appropriate to assign grades for my view of a child's mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, or customs. I am not yet clear on this issue.

What is clear is that the process of authentic assessment of children's activities and interactions during choice time is highly valuable for teacher/parent communication as well as for building teacher/student relationships.

Informed by my observations, I have become better able to reach consensus with parents on some of our definitions of life skills and delineations of social/emotional growth. Teacher/parent exchanges, in general, are more specific, more honest, and less adversarial. Some of the mystique surrounding assessment has been eliminated for parents and for myself. I am more confident about how it is that I know what I have come to understand about each child.

One of my goals for continued implementation of authentic assessment is that, with time and practice, fewer and fewer of my responses to parent inquiries about their student's day will be summative evaluations or labels. My responses will offer descriptions and reflections that will aid in our mutual advocacy for each child.

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